Books and So Forth

By Frederic F. Van de Water (F.F.V.)

WE ARE one of those hopelessly hidebound persons who continue, more through self-consciousness than virtue, to have a lingering prejudice in favor of a special and innocuous brand of speech for mixed company. Strive as we will, we can never be our real, full-flavored self on the rare occasions when we meet strange females socially.

We had come to regard this as a defect due, probably, to an obscure Puritan inheritance. Since reading "Rita Coventry," by Julian Street, we have almost revived our old belief that there is virtue in such an affliction. Mr. Street has convinced us all over again that one can be eloquent and at the same time reticent.

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Mr. Street tells the story of the unconventional love affairs of a vainglorious bachelor: first with a pink and yellow adoring woman, and, second, with a sultry, passionate and temperamental opera singer. It is possible that the genial hyenas who prefer their literary meat strong and aromatic may find "Rita Coventry" innocuous. To us it is an extraordinarily pleasant and able work, which is not marred, but rather improved, by the fact that Mr. Street leaps gracefully over places where some authors would lie down and wallow.

It is refreshing to find a writer now and then who can depict love affairs undestined for the Marriage License Bureau without either stirring up a bad smell or walking circuitously past certain topics with a finger on his lips and his eyes rolled up piously.

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Probably, as we have said before, shreds of Puritanism still cling to us. For that reason we have never been able to enter into whole-hearted sympathy with most of the modern exponents of erotic realism. We can respect the earnestness of some of them, but we think even these are suffering from delusion. They have apparently classed certain prohibitions established by taste as companion acts of suppression to the Stamp act and the Fugitive Slave law. In their enthusiasm for a freedom of expression which they seem to think is menaced they proceed to kick these prohibitions to pieces under the misapprehension that they are doing the world a service thereby.

There is a conspiracy, they are certain, to keep men from saying what they want to say. So they say more than they need to say, so that their defiance of this conspiracy may sound valiant and vehement.

Though we deplore their actions as unnecessary and painful we can sympathize with their mental attitude. Nothing fills the human soul with a stronger desire to do something than to be told that he mustn't. We can look back through the generations to the day when a misguided relative lectured to us, entirely needlessly, on the iniquity of swearing. We were impressed. More than that, we were inspired with a dark longing to perpetrate blasphemy. Though our verbal equipment was limited, we did our best as soon as the lecturer had left us to consider his warnings in our heart. Then, in the silence of our room, we said:

"Our Father, who art in heaven—hell, hell, I ll—hallowed by Thy name—hell, hell, hell," and continued the sacrilegious though monotonous litany all the way through to the end. Then we felt better and immensely daring.

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Some such spirit of human independence animates Mr. Ben Hecht and his more cultured associates. It has its admirable qualities, but it is disagreeable, and, it seems to us, unnecessary. We don't pretend to contest for a moment their license to write anything they please. We are as violently antinathetic to the Vice Society and other forms of censorship as they possibly can be. But we don't believe that books written solely to defy certain conventions and wholesome reticences are good art. Their authors always seem to behave in the raucous and vainglorious manner of small boys shooting craps on the corner in defiance of the cop. Most of them aren't crusaders; they're rather foolish iconoclasts. There is an air of self-consciousness about them that is missing from the work of earlier and much more explicit writers whose volumes are offered now in limited editions and sent to you on five days' approval by express. The modern Freudian realists' crusading strikes us as being as silly and futile as is the man who, bidden to a dance, appears in a flannel shirt and khaki trousers.

We like the pleasant deft, unspectacular style of "Rita Coventry." We like the sympathy and kindliness of the character drawing. We think his hero is a sap and the woman out of all the world whom he finally marries a completely harmonious helpmeet for him. Better than any one in the book, we like the tone in which Mr. Street has written it.

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Day by day in every way we become more and more puzzled. Each time we read anything new about Atlantic City we find it harder and harder to understand why any one goes there for relaxation.

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Of course, it's not impossible that the folk who go to Atlantic City can't understand how any one can be content to remain in New York and work, off and on, for a newspaper. But, then, in newspaper work you do meet so many interesting people.

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Our respect for the Bard of Avon has increased considerably—though we never wrote a word depreciating his genius, either—since we have discovered what Broadway is demanding to let us see "Hamlet" and "The Merchant of Venice." With orchestra chairs selling for what they are, our conversation on the classical drama this year will fall under the head of Shakespeare and the opera glasses.

More Chapters in Margot Asquith's Career

By Isabel Paterson

MARGOT ASQUITH An Autobiography Doran

THESE second and third volumes of Margot's Memoirs, which could easily have been compressed into one, are prefaced by a pleasingly candid motto, of which the last word seems to have been misspelled. "Les chiens aboyent, la caravane passe." It is, rather, but let it pass. There is also a statement by the author that she was undeterred by critical disapprobation of her earlier efforts, because it was directed "more against myself than my art." Memory fails either to verify or contradict, for the sayings of critics and politicians are writ in water. But if it were so, the point has been missed all around. It was her singular artlessness that gave offense where none need have been taken unless through the same quality.

Much precious indignation is also being waster over the present exhibit. It has been seriously taken to task as misrepresenting history. How can it do so? All of Mrs. Asquith's revelations are entirely personal to herself, and if she is a part of history—as we all are in our obscure way—she cannot very well misrepresent it. The truth about herself shrieks from every page. Her chiefest talent is spontaneity. She is not a poseuse nor a deceiver, but really a woman without guile. She has only two remarkable qualities, and those two positively inhibit any deception: she has never grown up and she has a wonderful gift of gab.

However, a reviewer should be pardoned for errors of attack upon her productions. A review should be in some sort consecutive and analytical. It should take a line. To do so after reading Mrs. Asquith is extremely difficult. One is baffled and exhausted trying to follow the flea-like hops of her mind and memory. She has no sense of form or order in writing, not even a chronological sense, and 400 pages of chaos is demoralizing, to say the least. Cabinet meetings and nursery teas, new hats and new governments jostle each other on such familiar terms that one feels like Alice at the Mad Hatter's tea party. But certainly it is no use asking for wine when there isn't any. One can only fall back upon the hay sandwiches. Assuredly, there is nothing like them, whether or not they are edible.

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THAT is, one can only discuss Mrs. Asquith. It seems necessary to apologize for doing so, more than in the case of her first offering. That frankly dealt with whatever private life she has had. This second let surveys by leaps and bounds, as the surveyor's copyist said—a period of immense historic interest, during which she was in contact with very many of the "great figures" then in the spotlight. She saw them, too, behind the scenes. And still the record concerns only Margot.

So that is one thing about her. She is a born leading lady and is bound to have the part or bust up the show. No one else shall hold the center of the stage even for their last moments. When Campbell-Bannerman was in the article of death, Mrs. Asquith, sitting in her carriage outside of No. 10 Downing Street, which C. B. still occupied as Prime Minister, gazed upon that historic house and "wondered how long we should live in it." Asquith, of course, was slated as C. B.'s successor.

Politics afforded her a background, and she evidently regarded them as precisely that. Her husband was Premier of the greatest commercial nation of the era, perhaps of any era, and she took the deepest interest in his work. How deep may be gleaned from this amazing remark:

"I never understood anything about finance, but gathered from the discussions which took place over the budget that it was an ingenious complicated, perfectly sound measure, with a touch of 'art nouveau.'" And if it hadn't the touch originally, she certainly supplied it right then and there.

Asquith, by the way, she represents as entirely responsible for the budget in question, and the benefits which accrued from it, whatever they were. One recalls dimly that at the time it was Lloyd George who came in for most of the abuse that preluded it.

However, it may be understood from the above that she is and was a devoted wife. She is also a fond mother, a believer in the up-to-date school of moral suasion in dealing with children. Her recital of the results of that method is eminently calculated to convert the wavering into outright supporters of the school of spanking. After writing out many good resolves about "self-enfolded mothers" who if their children please them are oblivious to the sufferings of others, she "succeeded in making baby so devoted to me that at sight of a friend or sister she would fling herself upon the floor and swallow the mat." The infant also threw hats into the fire, broke tea-cups and otherwise put mother's axioms in their proper place. . . . Lord Morley said some years later that she was very lucky in her children. No doubt the little dears might have burned the house down, but they refrained.

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MRS. ASQUITH is also what used to be called a womanly woman. The earmark of this is a rooted suspicion of her own sex as such. Dining at Windsor, she reports, Queen Mary "chaffed me about the suffragettes, who had been pursuing us with true feminine and monotonous malignity." A tender sentiment for two ladies to share, a great bond, as it were, such femininity. It places them upon a basis of mutual contempt at once.

For profundity, however, this observation about women is equaled by one of Mr. Asquith's, next reported, upon politics. "You can only make changes in this country constitutionally; any other method leads to revolution." Leads to it? Where does it start from?

But one could go on forever this way, as Mrs. Asquith did. And Lord Grey once gave her some excellent advice, which is just as good as new, not having been used: "God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few."

But just one more. Perpetual youth is a beautiful idea, theoretically. In practice it entails some disadvantages. To be young is to be receptive, eager, fitfully generous, quick to form attachments, an ardent champion even of bad causes. But it also involves a tendency to snap judgments, a total incapacity for seeing more than one side of a question and a raw egotism only held in check by salutary fits of shyness. Youth is Pandora's box wrapped in gilt paper and tied with pink ribbons, chiefly interesting for its possibilities. Take away those and let the package appear shopworn, and it isn't so inviting. It is not enough to feel young and act young; alas! one must look young, and, in short, be young.

Those who boast of having kept a youthful mind—do they ever pause to consider precisely what they mean by the phrase? If not, they should read Mrs. Asquith, and learn the worst. They will understand why Barrie put Peter Pan in the Never-Never Land. He belonged there.

Lubbock as Novelist

By A. Donald Douglas

EARLHAM. By Percy Lubbock. Scribner's

IN "Earlham" Mr. Lubbock has deserted the craft of fiction for the cultivated ecstasy of recollection. From the middle distance of a ripe maturity he sighs fondly back upon those first years at Earlham swathed within a beguiling luminance of memory. The childhood days that are no more he does not find sad and strange and wild with all regret of young apples too trustingly engulfed. His childhood days were colored with the wisdom of temperate grandparents, avuncular jollity and hallowed by the shining sanctuary of Earlham in whose echoing halls and over whose smooth lawns the children would wander in a sweet unrest. Earlham was much more than a building with rooms and servants and set about by velvet meadowland. It was a glory and a dream wherein each moment was savored like a rare and splendid chalice. These memories Mr. Lubbock has embodied in a style exquisitely attuned to the golden pathos of its distance.

"Earlham" is Mr. Kenneth Grahame disguised as Henry James and pretending to be Walter Pater mistaken for Arthur Christopher Benson. It is a fine-drawn and long-extended tonepoem of childhood at its most fleshless moments of first fine careful rapture. It is a prosepoem steeped in that "tone" which Henry James was so set on celebrating in two-volume novels. Not a panel in the woodwork or flower in the garden but draws its full measure of articulate appreciation, and everywhere shimmers the glow of sensibility. "Earlham" is simply the mood of childhood which Mr. Grahame so fastidiously represented in "The Golden Age."

Should a mere mood be elaborated at such unconscionable length? Pater's "Child in the House" or Mr. Grahame's "Dream Days" (especially that delicious story entitled "The Finding of the Princess") are beyond the degrading clutch of realistic censure just because they are moods and no more, presentments and instances of childhood. Now, suppose the story called "The Blue Room" enlarged to about fifteen times the length given it by Mr. Grahame and you have "Earlham." Remembering that Mr. Grahame has so perfectly rendered the dream of childhood in its richest evanescence, one wearies a little of Mr. Lubbock's world of sensibility. For the limpid precision of his style, for sentences of haunting and unforgettable beauty, I have only the most heartfelt praise. But where, for all their mannered and rhapsodic prose, the stories of Mr. Grahame are inspired enough to compel reverence and delight, the "Earlham" of Mr. Lubbock does become a strain and imprisonment of the coarse flesh.